DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 225 932 SO 014 548

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TITLE The Value of Early-Grade Social Studies: What the Research Says.
PUB DATE Nov 81
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council for the Social Studies (Detroit, MI, November 1981).
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Childhood Attitudes; *Childhood Needs; Educational Needs; Educational Trends; *Political Attitudes; *Political Socialization; Primary Education; *Social Studies
IDENTIFIERS Hidden Curriculum

ABSTRACT

Noting a current trend to remove social studies education from the first through third grades, the author's review of literature reveals that early learning lays the foundation for political socialization. Weissburg (1974) suggests that three models account for different types of socialization at different stages of life. Early political learning (primacy) establishes an individual's broad but basic political identity, loyalties, and ideologies. Later learning in the intermediate (later childhood and adolescence) and recency (experiences close in time to adulthood) stages consist of specific learnings of political information and attitudes, partisan preferences, and political participation. Learning during the latter stages tends to fit into the relatively stable core established during primacy. In the social studies curriculum, young children receive systematic "unhidden" political socialization; it is the part of the curriculum where the basics of political identity are shaped directly and overtly in the direction of democratic citizenship. Thus, the removal of social studies from the early grades would have an effect on how children are inducted into the political culture of this nation. (Author/KC)

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THE VALUE OF EARLY-GRADE SOCIAL STUDIES: WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

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A paper presented to the College and University Faculty Association of the National Council for the Social Studies at the Annual Meeting, Detroit, November 1981.

SP 014 540

THE VALUE OF EARLY-GRADE SOCIAL STUDIES

There is a trend in this nation to remove social studies education from the formal school curriculum through the third grade. Texas has already acted. Research evidence shows such action has serious implications. My purpose here is to present and synthesize selected research on political socialization so that decisions concerning early-grade social studies might be more informed.

The related research is aligned on a central point: The bulk of an individual's political self is learned. The occurrence of citizens who are positively oriented toward the institutions and principles of a democratic political system, and who are committed to informed participation in such a system, does not just happen. Indeed, people "are not born citizens of a particular nation-state. They are developed into citizens over time" (Dawson, 1980, p. 84). This "process of induction into the political culture" (Almond & Coleman, 1960), is known as political socialization.

What is Learned When?

There is the widely held assumption that our early learning strongly affects the kind of adults we will become. On this assumption, we justify everything from preschool and Sunday school to good toilet training and the removal of children from abusive home environments; with this maxim, we strive to protect children from physical and mental

deprivation and the acquisition of "bad habits." In short, much of society's normative order is based on this idea that the foundation for adult attitudes, values, knowledge, skills and behavior is built in early childhood. For this reason, too, we want our children to have skillful teachers, less violence on TV, good friends,and a moral upbringing. In whatever ways our values lead us to define "good friends" and "moral upbringing," such desires for our children are nevertheless rooted in the fundamental belief that early learning does make a critical difference in a person's adult life.

Social science researchers have attempted to get a grasp on this assumed persistence of early political learning into adulthood. Though more research is needed in this area, Weissberg (1974) points out that "at least some consensus exists among scholars on what types of early learning, at what points in childhood, are relatively more important for influencing adult political orientations" (p. 24).

Weissberg points to three different models of political socialization which appear at first glance to contradict each other. These models are the primacy model, the intermediate model, and the recency model.

The primacy model. According to this model, the political learning that is acquired in early childhood is the most profound because it forms the core of a person's political identity. This core includes basic loyalties to political institutions, symbols, historical figures, and ideologies. Though it can be modified by later learning, this core defines the outer boundaries of that learning. As Weissberg

describes the primacy model, it allows for only superficial change of the core political identity as an individual matures. In his words, "although the intellectual justifications for one's political attachments become more sophisticated and complex with age, the basic attachments themselves remain stable" (p. 27). The work of Greenstein (1965) and Dawson and Prewitt (1969) supports the primacy model.

The intermediate model. The intermediate model views later childhood and the adolescent years as the period when the most important political learning occurs. This model focuses not on basic loyalties and attachments, but on learning associated with political participation, partisan preference, and the learning of general political knowledge. Easton and Hess (1962) specify the period between ages eleven and thirteen as the period of maximum political learning.

The recency model. The researchers who advance the recency model, such as Almond and Verba (1963) and Jennings and Niemi (1968), designate those experiences that are closest in time to adulthood as having the greatest influence on the political choices and activity of adults. According to this model, the relative immaturity of children's conceptual tools prevents their comprehension of most of the circumstantial issues and ideas that attend adult political behavior. According to this model, early learning by young minds cannot be expected to have a significant, post-adolescent impact, especially when compared to the impact of actual adult involvement in political activity.

While they appear to conflict, these models actually complement each other. Weissberg saw this and reconciled them into a single broad model. In it, early political learning, as argued by the primacy model, establishes an individual's broad but basic political identity, loyalties, and ideologies. This early political socialization acts as a "filter" and, to one degree or another, confines the later, more specific learnings of political information and attitudes, partisan preferences, and political participation. While the earlier learning of the primacy period establishes the fundamental skeleton of an individual's political self, the later learning of the intermediate and recency periods adds flesh to the bones. There are, of course, exceptional cases in which later learning may alter the basic structure, but the rule is that early political socialization produces a relatively stable core into which any later political learning tends to fit. As Weissberg puts it, "details, but not the basics, are changed" (p. 28).

In short, different kinds of political learning occur in successive periods of an individual's life. This learning begins in early childhood and continues into the adults daily experience. Early learning lays the foundation and, therefore, is the most important.

The Role of the School in Political Learning

Throughout the three socialization periods, political learning occurs as an individual interacts with the social environment. This interaction is of two types: direct and indirect (Dawson and Prewitt, 1969). Examples of direct modes of political learning include imitation of the political behavior of role models, actual political experience and political education. Indirect political learning is distinguished by a two-step process. Orientations and behaviors are acquired in apparently non-political contexts; these orientations and behaviors are later used in political contexts (Greenstein, 1960). For example, children who learn to speak one at a time during "show and tell" activities might later be oriented to listen before speaking in a political discussion. The interplay of direct and indirect learning equips an individual with the unique repertoire of political identity, loyalties, knowledge, and behavior that comprise his or her political self.

The school is an important source of political learning, both direct and indirect (Key, 1961; Almond & Verba, 1963). Generally, children spend more waking hours at school than anywhere except home. The potency of the school as an agent of political socialization depends to a degree upon the amount and nature of the political socialization that is occurring in the child's other environments. It appears, for example, that the political orientations of children of low socioeconomic status (SES) families are influenced to a greater extent by the school environment than by the home or peer environment.

Low-SES children have significantly fewer political discussions at home where their parents are less interested in politics than are middle-class parents (Hess & Torney, 1967; Greenstein, 1965). Because lower-class children receive less political socialization outside of school, the direct and indirect political socialization that occurs in schools is all the more influential.

For children from middle-and high-SES homes, the political socialization that occurs in schools is also important. It reinforces and structures the political orientations that have already been initially developed at home. For these middle-and high-SES children, the political socialization acquired at school is, in Langton and Jennings' (1968) words, "redundant," but it may well be because of this redundancy that these middle- and upper-SES children develop more confident political selves than the lower-SES children do. Without the school reinforcement, these children might not develop the degree of political efficacy and competence that they tend to exhibit.

To summarize, research indicates that the school's role in the political socialization of children should not be taken lightly. For some children, the political learning that occurs at school strengthens what has already been learned elsewhere. For others, the school is where such learning initially occurs.

The Role of Social Studies in Political Learning

Having established the importance of the school in the political socialization of children does not necessarily establish the importance of the social studies curriculum within the school. After all, it is

evident that a good deal of political socialization occurs at school but outside of the social studies curriculum. Indeed, the informal, "hidden" curriculum of the school provides students with indirect political instruction that may equal or surpass the direct political instruction provided them in the social studies curriculum (cf., Giroux, 1979; Illich, 1971; Kozol, 1975). One only has to peer into an elementary classroom in February, with its striking configuration of log cabins, cherry trees, and valentines, to begin to understand the political socialization occuring informally throughout the school.

The importance of the social studies curriculum in the political socialization of children, then, does not lie in a naive claim that without the social studies curriculum no political socialization would occur. Rather, it lies in the understanding that the social studies curriculum is that part of the school curriculum where systematic, "unhidden" political socialization occurs. In the social studies curriculum, children receive direct instruction about the family, the community, states, the nation, and the world; about democratic ideals and processes, and about themselves as participants. Social studies is that part of the school curriculum where the "basics" of young children's political identities are shaped directly and overtly in the direction of democratic citizenship.

It is reasonable to conclude, therefore, that the removal of social studies curriculum from the early grades would have an impact on the induction of children into the political culture of this nation. Its removal would accomplish the elimination of what is perhaps the key source of

direct political learning from children's lives just when the foundation of their political selves is being formed. An avowed democratic society places itself in a thoroughly tenuous position when it considers leaving such a critical task as political socialization to chance rather than addressing it directly as a regular part of the school curriculum.

Consequently, the issue needing the attention of legislators and educators is not whether to include a social studies curriculum in the early grades, but how to enhance its quality in such a way that more students achieve from it the needed democratic commitments, knowledge and skills.

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Acknowledgment

The author wishes to thank Theodore Kaltsounis for his helpful advice on this manuscript.